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## Marriage and the Family Crisis in Letters of the Polish Episcopate after World War II

During recent years, proliferating ideological and legislative pressure aimed at the destruction of the traditional marriage and family that our civilisation is based on, and the promotion of promiscuity, have been observed with heartache. Demands to equalise cohabitation with the family are increasing. “There are attempts to put children’s rights in the opposition to parents’ rights. The cruel crime of abortion still has its supporters. Some people have recently sought to legalise genetic manipulation to the point of *in-vitro* fertilisation and have attempted to familiarise the society with euthanasia. Generally speaking, something that from the point of view of human dignity and the common

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good is just a disaster has been presented as progress of civilisation or scientific achievement”<sup>1</sup>.

Materialistic values alone are not enough for society. Spiritual values determine its greatness and strength. These values originate from the family, in which, every person shapes his or her conscience, and the sense of good and evil in the process of upbringing. It is in the family that a person gets accustomed to returning everything due. The Bishops in Poland have repeatedly referred to those spiritual values in their pastoral letters. This article addresses the idea of marriage and family crisis as perceived by the Bishops. The analysis of pastoral letters of the Polish Episcopal Conference draws attention to the threat of a crisis of faith and morality, the departure from the true meaning of the words “love” and “happiness”, and last but not least, the abandonment of the sacramental dimension of marriage.

## 1. Crisis of faith and morality

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* we read: “The celebration of the sacrament of marriage is the basic moment of the faith of the couple. This sacrament, in essence, is the proclamation in the Church of the Good News concerning married love. It is the word of God that “reveals” and “fulfills” the wise and loving plan of God for the married couple, giving them a mysterious and real share in the very love with which God Himself loves humanity. Since the sacramental celebration of marriage is itself a proclamation of the word of God, it must also be a “profession of faith” within and with the Church, as a community of believers, on the part of all those who in different ways participate in its celebration. This profession of faith demands that it be prolonged in the life of the married couple and of the family. God, who called the couple to marriage, continues to call them in marriage. (122) In and through the events, problems, difficulties and circumstances of everyday life, God comes to them, revealing and presenting the concrete “demands” of their sharing in the love of Christ for His Church in the particular family, social and ecclesial situation in which they find themselves. The discovery of and obedience to the plan of God on the part of the conjugal and family community must take place in “togetherness,” through the human experience of love between husband and wife, between parents and children, lived in the Spirit of Christ. Thus the little

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<sup>1</sup> Polish Episcopal Conference, Bishops’ Council for the Family, *Służyć prawdzie o małżeństwie i rodzinie*, Warsaw 2009, no. 8.

domestic Church, like the greater Church, needs to be constantly and intensely evangelized: hence its duty regarding permanent education in the faith”<sup>2</sup>.

Difficulties related to living conditions, poverty and lack of residential space provide an opportunity for and temptation of sin, although the real crisis of marriage and the family lies elsewhere. It should be sought primarily in the general crisis of faith and morality. Little faith, and poor knowledge of its principles, combined with the propaganda of various ethical doctrines cause a chaos of views in society. This is especially dangerous for young people and makes it difficult for them to take their first steps in their personal and marital life. Moreover, the chaos of views, as well as a weak and wavering faith, affect the moral crisis. The Bishops also see this crisis in the selfishness which manifests itself in a consumerist attitude, eroticism and reluctance to sacrifice and refrain from one’s own pleasures. In 1964, the Bishops encouraged the deepening and revival of faith: “God has to be the primary value in our lives – «Thou shall have no other gods before me». His law, which is always valid and most excellent, deserves our full confidence without any limitations or excuses and any human aspirations, or rights contrary to the law of God cannot become a standard behaviour. Opening one’s heart to God, to live in it by his grace, is not only the duty of every person God created but also his dignity and happiness”<sup>3</sup>.

In the same letter, the Bishops of Poland emphasize that granting God the primary position in our lives should entail recognition of the moral law. The ability to know the moral order and the free will is human dignity and privilege. By advocating moral order, we gain value and happiness, whilst if we break it, we commit a sin, which is a conscious and voluntary violation of the moral law and the removal of God from our life<sup>4</sup>.

The truths of faith are intended to preserve the highest values if they are followed. In the obedience towards faith which the Church requires from Christian spouses, it can be understood how sacred and worthy the family is made by Christ, as the “sign and place of the covenant of love between God and mankind, between Jesus Christ and the Church, his Bride”<sup>5</sup>. Hence, the sole preparation for marriage is

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops on the Feast of the Holy Family in the eighth year of the great novena of the Polish Catholic family of 18 December 1964, in: Letters of the Polish bishops 1945–2000, Marki 2003, vol. I, p. 423.

<sup>4</sup> See Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops on the Feast of the Holy Family in the eighth year of the great novena of the Polish Catholic family of 18 December 1964, p. 424.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 51.

a journey of faith. Such a moment of faith for a husband and a bride is the very sacrament of marriage; it is a “profession of faith made in Church and with the Church”<sup>6</sup>. The Bishops encouraged resorting to faith and reflecting on this subject. “There is no other way to an authentic Christian family than the way of faith, and to protect the endangered Christian values of family life against the selfishness of individuals, there is no other way than obedience to the sacred undisturbed principles of faith”<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. Degradation of the terms “love” and “happiness”

The Bishops of Poland have repeatedly pointed out that the word “love” in contemporary language had been impoverished and narrowed to mean a feeling, or even degraded to mean sexual drive. “As a result of confusion of terms, it is nowadays often heard that “love absolves everything,” so – allegedly – it also absolves the sin of impurity prior to marriage or outside it or between spouses. It even supposedly justifies breaking the marriage. It is not true! Only God can absolve sins. What is true is that true love does not commit sin, as true love seeks and gives what is good, whereas sin is the greatest evil”<sup>8</sup>. Subsequently, in the letter of 1964, the Bishops reminded what Christian love is. They stated that, in Christian language, love is mainly an attitude of mind and will, perception of value, respect, sacrifice and devotion. This love is patient and without hypocrisy, it does not seek its own, does not keep record of wrongs, bears all and endures all<sup>9</sup>. In other words, love is irreplaceable, a unifying and constructive power of marriage and the family<sup>10</sup>.

In 2005, the Polish Bishops noted that the future of our motherland, Europe and the world, can be optimistic if it is built by people who believe in love and want to live by it, understanding it not only as emotions, and the source of impressions, but as a happy opportunity to take responsibility for the beloved in order to enjoy an unbreakable relationship with one person forever; people who perceive the mystery

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<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Pastoral Letter on the Feast of the Holy Family of 2 December 1982, vol. I, p. 1385–1386.

<sup>8</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family in the eighth year of the great novena of Polish Catholic family, p. 425.

<sup>9</sup> See 1 Cor 13:7–7.

<sup>10</sup> See Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family in the eighth year of the great novena of Polish Catholic family, p. 425.

of the human body and the gift of marital intercourse with a sense of holiness and awe, those who welcome a newborn child with a prayer of worship and view every life – from the moment of conception to natural death – as sanctity; people for whom human dignity is the absolute value every time and everywhere<sup>11</sup>.

The notion of “happiness” has also been degraded. Happiness is what everyone is entitled to. God created a man in order to share happiness with him. Human happiness is connected with development. A person cannot be happy in stagnation, when his or her horizons are narrowed. Therefore in 1969, the Bishops urged the believers to make use of the experience of all generations. A person does not taste happiness by tasting all pleasures and accumulating wealth. At the end of such a pursuit, a person feels bored and empty. It is only coping with difficulties, that gives us the foretaste of happiness. Happiness lies in acquiring and not in using the finished product. Happiness cannot be achieved for free, since it is the result of and reward for service. We strive for true happiness through effort, service and sacrifice. We are happy because of well-performed tasks and duties, fidelity to one’s vocation and of the path that we have come so far. This is why Christ himself is the guarantee of a family’s happiness<sup>12</sup>. Subsequently, the Bishops answer two important questions, which often appear in this context: So where does disappointment come from? Why are there so many people for whom happiness seems to be more distant today than when they vowed lifelong love at the altar? They answer that “God accepted your wedding vows not to deceive you. If you feel disappointed, it means that the hope for easy and cheap happiness failed to pass the test of life. The vocation for marriage and the family is not a promise of continuous elation and festive mood. Marriage and the family are a gift from God, but they are also a hard and responsible task. Whoever commits to this task without sincerity will never enjoy happiness. The first enchantment which gave you wings will fade away with the mundane everyday life – such life that you will be able to create. The seed planted by the sacrament of marriage requires attentive care, in order not to be drowned out by all that everyday life brings, the temptation to strive for one’s own convenience and for the illusory happiness”<sup>13</sup>. According to the Bishops, the primary task of a family is helping one another. No one is allowed to start a family in order to be served by others. Spouses have to adjust not to a personal convenience but

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<sup>11</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family of 30 December 2005, “Currenda” 1 (2006), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family of 1 October 1969, vol. I, p. 703.

<sup>13</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family of 1 October 1969, vol. I, p. 704.

to the convenience of their loved ones and their happiness. “At the same time, it is happiness for all of you, gained in the service for your families: for the husband, wife and children. This is also your path to eternal happiness”<sup>14</sup>.

The analysis of the Polish Bishops’ pastoral letters reveals the to answer to questions of how to make a happy marriage and family life. Marriage and family psychology, and family pedagogy help to find the right answer. However, the indications of those fields are insufficient. Marital life cannot be limited to what is currently pleasant or comfortable. The sacrament of marriage is a lot more than the legalisation of a relationship upon the principles of this world. It is the entrance of spouses into a special communion with Christ. It is a decision to make the whole life – everything that happens in the hearts, minds, body and each moment of everyday life of spouses – a living picture of God. Such a marital life is aimed at finding completeness and happiness, which are possible on the foundation of deep everyday intimacy with God. The communion with God develops and deepens by everyday prayer of individuals, spouses and the whole family. It is fed by meditation of the Word of God and adoration of Christ in the Holy Sacrament. It longs for frequent reception of the Eucharist. It opens our eyes to the need of continuous conversion, and consequently the mature experience of the sacrament of penance<sup>15</sup>.

### 3. Departure from the sacramental meaning of marriage

The indissolubility of sacramental marriage stems from the fact that by means of this sacrament, spouses have been included in the permanent unity that exists between Christ and the Church, which is Christ’s Mystical Body. As Christ, the Head, and the Church, form one inseparable body, so the spouses sanctified by the grace of God form one inseparable body unto death<sup>16</sup>. Sacramental marriage is therefore more than just a human agreement and a promise of mutual love. The word, once given, is a commitment to uphold the promise. The very nature of love requires the durability of marriage. The vows of only temporary love and fidelity would sound flippant, e.g. “I vow to love you until the moment I get bored” or “I vow to love you until the moment I meet somebody nicer, better-looking than

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<sup>14</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family of 1 October 1969, vol. I, p. 704.

<sup>15</sup> Family Life in Communion with God, the Polish Bishops’ pastoral letter upon the Sunday of the Holy Family of 26 December 2010, “Currenda” 4 (2010), p. 40–41.

<sup>16</sup> See Eph 5:21–23. 29.

you”<sup>17</sup>. God requires that human love should be permanent and responsible for the other person. Temporary, or trial, marriage, to find out if the other person suits us, is a misunderstanding of love. Even children’s welfare require the stability and indissolubility of marriage. A child needs its parents and a family in the atmosphere of unity based on love and mutual respect for human dignity.

The Bishops of Poland note that marriage and family are often at a crossroads. One cannot rely on the strength of traditions and customs, let alone on civil legislation. The widespread destruction of centuries-old tradition by irresponsible and brutal violation of customs calls for an in-depth reflection on Christian marriage. In 1974, the Bishops noted that the evil, that family and the whole mankind was affected by, was the evil of the old Greek and Roman society. The protection of authentic values of marriage, against this evil, is not the result of contemporary civil rights, which rather favoured the decomposition of family. But the complete transformation of the meaning marriage and family life took place due to early Christians. Those people married like everybody else but did not depart like others; they were ‘of flesh’ but did not live according to flesh. By the life of faith, they gained the kindness of pagans and contributed to conversions and the widespread adoption of the Word of God<sup>17</sup>.

Judicial practice shows that many people who decide to enter into a sacramental marriage, in fact, treat it as a contract, a civil agreement which can be terminated at any time. Those who claim that they depart because they love each other no longer, must realise that the marriage bond exists even when, at some point, it seems that love has disappeared. The most common marital failures include: the unilateral pursuit of self-fulfilment in marriage. Such hypersensitivity to oneself is a common reason for divorces and is always present in the cases where direct reasons for divorce seem to be different for each party; the lack of genuine mutual understanding. Infatuation often contributes to the formation of an improved image of the other person by seeing only positive features about him or her and ignoring the less favourable ones; exaggerated expectations. The sources of many marital crises are expectations of the spouse which are too high, but should be perceived mostly as an offering made of oneself; no time to be together. Life in a constant hurry, so characteristic of the contemporary world, does not allow young spouses to be together peacefully. Some “thieves of time” may be the computer, TV, sport, hobbies, exaggerated childcare, etc.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Pastoral word upon the sacramental meaning of marriage of 26 November 1974, v. I, p. 1020.

<sup>18</sup> See A. Cattaneo, *I żyli długo i szczęśliwie* (orig. Title: ...y viveron felices), Ząbki 2001, p. 55–57. Also See I. Bañares, Comentario al c. 1056 CIC, in: A. Marzoa, J. Miras, R. Rodriguez-Ocaña, Comentario

It is then that spouses live under the same roof but are alienated and have nothing to say to each other. These several examples of marital crises – which usually end up in a divorce. – are an indication that Catholic marriage is often viewed as something temporary, aren't they?

Seeing the danger of departure of the Polish people from the sacramental understanding of marriage, the Bishops present their lecture on that subject. No material relationship, acquaintanceship or friendship can express the union of Christ with the Church as perfectly as the sacrament of marriage. The sacramental relationship of a man and a woman does not only resemble the bond of Christ with the Church, but actually participates in it. The mutual love of Christian spouses is not only natural but also becomes supernatural owing to God's grace. Taking part in the indissoluble bond of love between Christ and the Church by grace, sacramental marriage discovers its essential nature, i.e. the indissoluble unity. By advocating the indissolubility of marriage, the Church grants Christian spouses the same right that governs its own bond with Christ. This is why the Church can never undermine a sacramental symbol without denying its own mystery and the repudiation of its covenant with God<sup>19</sup>.

There is always hardship and suffering in married life. The union of Christ and the Church is also the result of passion and death. Christ loved his Church to such an extent that he suffered death. Love is a sacrifice on both sides. True human love cannot avoid sacrifice, either. Christian spouses can provide for their relationship the value of a symbol relative to the love of Christ and the Church only when they agree that their lives were marked by the sign of the cross. The Bishops emphasise that the adoption of the cross in marriage reminds us yet another truth, that the mutual love of Christian spouses participates in the paschal mystery of Christ, that is, in his passion, death and resurrection. The grace of the sacrament strengthens the spouses to live a holy life, i.e. to diligently nurture and pray for love, generosity and the spirit of sacrifice<sup>20</sup>. In view of the alarming phenomena, the Bishops urge to answer them with a deep awareness of the content of Christian marriage and cite the words of St. Peter's admonition: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"<sup>21</sup>.

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Exegético al Código de Derecho Canónico, v. III/2, Pamplona 1997, p. 1049–1053.

<sup>19</sup> I. Bañares, Comentario al c. 1056 CIC, p. 1019.

<sup>20</sup> I. Bañares, Comentario al c. 1056 CIC, p. 1020; See *Gaudium et spes* 49.

<sup>21</sup> Rom 12:2.



In the letter of 1964, the Bishops directly encouraged the faithful to defend the Christian understanding of marriage and family. The family as a natural institution is created by the relationship of a man and a woman and their children born from this relationship. The basis of family is marriage, a bilateral agreement in which the spouses are devoted to each other exclusively and permanently for the procreation and upbringing of offspring. This natural institution has been raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament. A civil contract only regulates the legal and civic side of marriage and does not entitle to lead a marital life without the sacrament. "On the other hand – the Bishops emphasise – no human authority can break the bonds of sacramental marriage, just as it cannot erase the stigma of anyone's baptism or confirmation"<sup>22</sup>.

However, not everything should be seen so pessimistically. In 1982, the Bishops stated that numerous contemporary families were not affected by the inner and outer influences and difficulties. They preserved the Christian vision of a person who has his dignity. "All the respect for family life and the indissolubility of marriage stems from such a perception of another person. At the same time, families retained their freedom, which does not mean doing whatever one wants, but the choice of real values which deepen and strengthen mutual love"<sup>23</sup>.

#### **4. "Poland cannot forget about family"**

The Bishops expressed their views on the state policy towards family. They articulated it most clearly in the Pastoral Letter of 30 December 2005. They state that the current state policy did not support or defend family rights as it should have. It allowed the exploitative attitude of employers towards families. The Bishops observed with anxiety and inner pain how working on Sundays hugely devastated marital life. They emphasised that a quarter of century earlier, people in Gdańsk had demanded that holidays were respected. The disorganised craving for immediate profit, at any cost, nowadays, should not rob people of, what we used to view as, one of the most basic rights and values. Employees are not and cannot be seen just as a workforce. They are mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, who need to be provided with the elementary right to family and marital life. Catholic

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<sup>22</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family in the eighth year of the great novena of Polish Catholic family, p. 426.

<sup>23</sup> Letter upon the feast of the Holy Family of 2 December 1982, p. 1382.

social doctrine has always taught that, by giving birth to and raising children and shaping the atmosphere of love, a family serves the society and works for the future of the world. This significant contribution of the family to the future of the nation cannot be underestimated, especially in Poland. Although the existence and development of all the nations is due to families, Poland has a particular debt of gratitude towards the family. For generations, the Polish family had to act as a state and take responsibility for the shape, duration and future of Poland, at a time when the Polish state did not exist on the map of the world, and when the state did not care about the nation. The Polish nation has an immense debt of gratitude towards Polish family. It is in the family that the Polish language, culture and the truth about the nation's history survived. It is a healthy family where the memory of national heroes lives most strongly and permanently, heroes who paid for this freedom with imprisonment with their own blood. Poland cannot forget about the family. This is why the Bishops of Poland hope for the announcement of the extension of the period of paid maternity leave. At the same time, they anxiously accept the request made by employers to young married women not to have children in the near future. Worrying is the request of the so-called availability at work, which hinders an employee's personal life. Worrying is also the devious request of the so-called self-employment and endless extensions of definite employment agreements. Many craftsmen and small family businesses have been destroyed because many rich people refused to pay for their work, recognising this practice as the cheapest means of lending. According to the Polish Episcopate, all of this causes uncertainty and stress, destroys family peace and deprives of hope, the result being a rapid increase of depressions, the consequence of countless human dramas<sup>24</sup>.

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The Polish Episcopate's document entitled *Służyć prawdzie o małżeństwie i rodzinie* (en. *In Service of the Truth about Marriage and Family*) calls for moral order in the society. Noticeable is also the call for order in the sphere of married and family life. "This order is the foundation of life of every human being and every society. This is why Poland nowadays needs for people of conscience, first and foremost. To be a person of conscience primarily means to listen to one's own [properly shaped] conscience in every situation and never to suppress it. (...) In public life and media, great, and perhaps increasing, intolerance spreads under the

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<sup>24</sup> Pastoral letter of the Polish Bishops upon the feast of the Holy Family of 30 December 2005.

banner of tolerance. Believers can feel it painfully. (...) The time of trial of Polish consciences continues”<sup>25</sup>.

Marital life cannot be restricted to what is pleasant or comfortable at the moment, if it is to be beautiful and durable. The unity and sanctity of marriage is the Church’s persistent concern. When spouses are parents, its legitimacy becomes even more evident. Unfortunately, the increasing number of disintegrating marriages is a growing social problem, which has a negative impact on children and young people’s education and contributes to their negative experiences. Stability and the sense of security, which a child should experience, is the key element of upbringing in a family. Thus, a thorough preparation of engaged couples for the sacrament of marriage, and tasks associated with motherhood and fatherhood, is essential. If this preparation is promoted and invested in the crisis of marriage and the family would perhaps not be as manifest.

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<sup>25</sup> *Służyć prawdzie o małżeństwie i rodzinie*, no. 137.